DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 122 PS 020 837

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TITLE Capturing the Quality of Education Provision for Young Children: A Story of Developing Professionals and Developing Methodology.
PUB DATE Aug 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education (2nd, Worcester, England, August 27-29, 1992); see PS 020 890.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Data Collection; *Educational Assessment; *Educational Quality; Educational Research; *Evaluation Criteria; *Evaluation Methods; Foreign Countries; *Preschool Education; *Research Methodology; Research Utilization; Staff Development
IDENTIFIERS *United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

A study documented, evaluated, and compared the quality of education provided to 3- and 4-year-old children in diverse settings in the United Kingdom. The study also explored the relationship between different forms of child care settings and children's educational experiences, and considered the use of a combination of an evaluation of educational quality and professional development and training as an instrument for improving the quality of early childhood education. Detailed, qualitative descriptions of the experiences and practices, related to educational quality, of individuals involved in creating children's educational experiences were gathered. These individuals included managers, educators, parents, and children. This qualitative method is based on a recognition of the subjective and value-laden nature of the concept of quality. Data were gathered for 10 dimensions of quality: (1) aims and objectives; (2) curriculum; (3) teaching and learning styles; (4) planning, assessment, and record keeping; (5) staffing levels and staff training; (6) physical environment; (7) relationships and interaction; (8) equal opportunities with regard to race, class, and disability; (9) parental involvement, liaison, and coordination; and (10) monitoring and evaluation. Data for each dimension were collected using documentary analysis, systematic and focused observation and interviews, professional biographies, and vignettes. The type of qualitative methodology used is labor intensive, time consuming, and subject to bias, and can result in data overload. However, it also results in vivid, rich, and detailed accounts of policy grounded in practice; requires little specialist expertise to implement; and has a number of possible applications. (Contains 19 references.) (AC)

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PAPER PRESENTED AT THE SECOND EUROPEAN CONFERENCE ON THE QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION, WORCESTER, UK.
AUGUST 26TH-28TH 1992.

ED352122

"CAPTURING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION PROVISION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN: A STORY OF DEVELOPING PROFESSIONALS AND DEVELOPING METHODOLOGY"

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I want to share with you the story of how I, and the early childhood educators I have been working with over the last twelve months, have developed in our quest to understand better the processes which affect the educational lives of our youngest children. It is a story of developing professionals and developing methodology. In its telling I believe a number of broader issues are raised that reflect the current view of research in early childhood education, which continues to experience low status, low visibility and low funding in a market driven and economically competitive world.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The pursuit of quality in education and welfare services is high on the political agenda in the UK, where it featured as a central plank in the recent election manifestos of the major political parties. This followed an increasing concern expressed throughout the 90's about declining standards and the level of spending on public services. In the 1992 General Election politicians responded with commitments and citizen's charters to establish high quality provision for all across a range of services. The education and care of the under fives has been incorporated into this quest for quality, with a major Government Committee of Inquiry set up specifically to investigate quality in this area of provision (DES, Starting With Quality, 1990).

Many words have been written about the importance of high quality education for young children since this committee reported but the rhetoric has not been matched with much action. Provision for the under fives in the UK remains variable, diverse and at a low level. There is still no national policy of education and care for these children and current Government policy continues to emphasise the shared responsibility of parents, business and local communities. The stated rationale for this policy is that an expansion of high quality provision will be achieved through the application of market forces. It is envisaged that the encouragement of a diverse range of provision for under fives will provide parents, as consumers, with choice, and the ensuing competition will force up standards and increase quality.

PS 020837

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It is certainly true that this policy has resulted in the development of an ever wider range of educational settings for the under fives in the UK, with responsibility split between education, health, social services, voluntary groups and the private sector. While the Children Act 1989 attempted to establish minimum standards of provision, and the Rumbold Report 1990 established a framework for quality provision and practice, in reality the quality of much of this provision remains questionable and elements of it have been substantially criticised (Bennett and Kell 1989, DES 1989, Pascal 1990). There is quite a substantive evidential base on the effects of different kinds of care settings on the experience and development of young children now in existance (Belsky 1984, Hennessey et al 1992). However, in these studies the emphasis has been very much on the effects of childcare policy and services on the under threes. There remain some important gaps in our knowledge which need to be addressed. In particular, there have been few studies which have focussed upon:

1. The EDUCATIONAL environment and experience of the under fives in many of these settings.

2. The two vital years preceding statutory schooling ie.from THREE TO FIVE YEARS.

3. COMPARATIVE evidence between different kinds of educational settings for the under fives.

It remains true that at the present time, very little is known about the quality of educational provision in many of the settings in which three and four year old children are now being educated. This seems astonishing given the high profile of this area of policy in recent years and the Government's focus on quality in the education system and their commitment to ensuring children's entitlement to an equitable and high quality curriculum. Research which evaluates the quality of educational provision for the under fives would facilitate both parents in making their rational choices and decision makers in targeting their limited resources more effectively. Yet research directed at providing this information remains patchy and under funded.

It is in this context that this paper is presented. It provides a discussion of the methodology employed in a relatively small scale research project which is attempting to address these issues directly by evaluating and developing the quality of educational provision for three and four year olds in a diverse range of settings. The origins of the project lie in the authors' professional and research experience in the education of under fives (Pascal and Ghaye 1988, Pascal 1990), and her involvement in the political processes of policy making for this age group (DES, Rumbold Report 1990). As such, the project has its base in two complementary areas of inquiry - policy analysis and educational development, which the author believes are inextricably interwoven in the education and care of under fives. The politics of early childhood education and the resulting policy decisions have had an immediate and direct effect on the quality and extent of provision for young children in the UK. Thus, an evaluation of the impact of current Government policies on the educational experiences of under fives is imperative for the future develop-

ment of this critically important part of our education system. The other key feature of the project is its intention to combine evaluation of policy and practice with professional development. This is based on the conviction that research should feed directly into practice and that evaluation should be something "done with" people not "done to" them. Previous research experience by the author has shown that by involving participants in the evaluation process the quality of their practice is significantly enhanced (Pascal and Ghaye 1988) and that it is in this way that fundamental and long term improvements at a grassroots level are achieved. This duality of focus in the projects' genesis gives this research an innovative and original character which is reflected in its theoretical base and its aims and objectives.

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The project is a three year college funded intiative in its first year of operation, during which methodology and research instruments have been developed and piloted. Its approach and methodology are derived from previous work undertaken by the author in her research into under fives in infant classrooms (Pascal 1990). Its aims are four-fold:

1. To document and evaluate the quality of educational provision for three and four year olds in a diverse range of settings in the UK.

2. To compare the quality of educational provision for three and four year olds across a diverse range of settings in the UK.

3. To explore how far different forms of provision are associated with qualitatively different educational experiences.

4. To consider how evaluation of quality combined with professional development and training can be an active instrument in improving the quality of early childhood education.

SOME CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Developing the research methodology raised a number of conceptual issues for the team in the early stages of the project. Responding to these involved us in a careful consideration of how the notion of quality has been conceptualized in theory and operationalized in practice.

The project took as its starting point Pirsig's (1974) notion that quality is a value-laden and subjective concept, with no clear paremeters. This makes any precise and definitive measurement of quality problematic, and probably inappropriate. Historically there have been many different interpretations of the concept of quality in welfare policy and practice. Pfeffer and Coote (1991) have usefully classified four approaches to quality which can be identified in the current debate about public services, each of which has been imported from the commercial world.The four approaches are summarised as,

"• The traditional approach - to convey prestige and positional advantage

• The "scientific" or expert approach - to meet standards set by experts

• The managerial or "excellence" approach - to measure customer satisfaction

• The consumerist approach - to make the customer more powerful."

Pfeffer and Coote 1991 pi

They argue that ultimately each of these approaches fail because it is inappropriate to transfer concepts from commerce to welfare. As an alternative they propose "the democratic approach" which recognises that a key objective of welfare services is equity, and for this a multifaceted approach is needed which involves experts, managers, practitioners and also those who use the services in the development of quality. This "democratic approach", which aims to make services RESPONSIVE, to ensure they are FIT FOR PURPOSE and to EMPOWER those who use and provide them, is embodied and exemplified in the projects' rationale.

In its inception and development the project has therefore celebrated the subjective and value-laden nature of the concept of quality, attempting to capture the individual interpretations of quality which characterise provision and practice in each setting. There is no attempt to give a fixed definition of quality or to measure it quantifiably and objectively. Rather, the aim is to capture the essence of quality as it is reflected in practice and to explore how the individuals in each setting, including managers, educators, parents and children, experience and interpret educational quality. To do so the project gathers detailed, qualitative descriptions of the "lived" reality of those involved in creating the quality of educational experience for the child. The collaborative compilation of these detailed descriptions provide a central part of the evaluation process and become a major vehicle for the ensuing professional development of participants.

This kind of qualitative methodology, which derives from a naturalist paradigm, is often accused of being "woolly", "romantic" or "soft", (terms used by referees in their assessments of some of my research funding applications). Such criticisms usually stem from those wedded to the supposed rigour of a positivist paradigm who find it difficult to acknowledge the validity of an alternative approach. I refute these criticisms absolutely, believing that although the two paradigms are fundamentally different in character they are not necessarily in conflict and may be equally valid. The project draws upon the highly developed and rigorous research traditions of anthropology and ethnography to substantiate this claim. The use of well developed and skilled research techniques, such as close and focussed observation, indepth interviews and case studies, allows the researcher to record the real and lived world, with its differing value bases and individual belief systems, it allows the researcher to see things in their context and from different perspectives, and it allows the researcher to explore the processes and linkages

which characterise the social world in their entire complexity. This kind of approach may be termed "soft" but this softness makes it "sensitive". This sensitivity brings its own validity, reliability and rigour based on the depiction of the empirical social world as it actually exists for those involved rather than on what the researcher believes it to be.

The approach is based upon the belief that researchers in early childhood education do not operate in a "science nuetral" context and that to deny the subjective nature of the concepts we use, the methodology we employ and the social world in which we operate may result in research which is fatally flawed. The pursuit of quantifiable, measurable quality indicators all too often arises from external pressures which have their origins in a concern about money and monitoring, rather than a deep seated commitment to development. I cannot believe that educational quality is enhanced by attempts to quantify it. In my experience, the quality we are pursuing is dependent upon the interrelationship of a number of immeasurable and often human factors, which may be passed over in the struggle for objectivity and the perceived rigour of statistical analysis.

However, I do not wish to polarise the methodological debate into a battle for supremacy of one approach over the other. My own work has led me to agree with Patton's (1980) notion of a "paradigm of choices" which recognises that research can draw usefully upon a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodology according to the demands of the research questions under investigation. For me the real challenge has been how to operationalise the value based concept of quality in a highly systematic and rigorous way and I drew upon a number a sources to achieve this:

1. Bronfenbrenners' (1989) work on the ecology of human development which views the child at the centre of a number of nested levels of context, - the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem, - all of which influence the child's experience and development.

2. The development work undertaken in the USA and UK on quality indicators and rating scales for education and care settings (NAEYC 1984, Harms and Clifford 1980, Nebraska State Board of Education 1989, McCail 1991, Balageur et al 1992).

3. The development work undertaken by the author utilizing the criteria of quality identified by the Rumbold Report (DES 1990).

After considering the literature the team felt that to apply pre-conceived and rigidly defined criteria of quality in a collaborative evaluation process was inappropriate. We felt that the identification of a set of ten dimensions or aspects of quality would provide the project with a framework which would allow for individual interpretation and also meet the research requirements of consistency and comparability in the research process. The ten dimensions are briefly summarised in TABLE 1. Each dimension is not defined in detail as previous development work has shown that, although there is consensus that the quality of educational experience is shaped and influenced by these factors which may be identified in general terms, they are in practice interpreted very differently according to the values, attitudes and beliefs

operating in each setting (Pascal and Bertram 1991, Pascal 1992). It is precisely this rich diversity of interpretation of the ten dimensions that the project aims to capture.

TABLE 1: TEN DIMENSIONS OF QUALITY

DIMENSION	EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS
1. Aims and objectives	What is the management structure? Who formulates policy? What are the aims and objectives? How are these communicated? What is their rationale?
2. Curriculum	What does the curriculum contain? What is the breadth and balance of the curriculum? How is it differentiated? How are continuity and progression achieved?
3. Teaching and learning styles	How do children learn? What is the teaching style? How is the programme organised? How is the learning managed?
4. Planning, assessment and record keeping	How are planning, assessment and record keeping implemented? Who is involved? What does it look like? How is it used?
5. Ratio of trained staff	What are staffing levels? What are the training, experience and qualifications of the staff? How are the staff deployed? How is staff development achieved?
6. Physical environment	What kind of building do they operate in? How much space is there? How is it utilised? What facilities are there? What resources and equipment are available? What condition are they in? How are they used?

7. Relationships and interaction	What is the level and style of interaction? What are the relationships and how are they established? How are individuals catered for? How much involvement is there? What codes of conduct operate?
8. Equal opportunities	What is the policy with regard to gender, race, class and disability? How is this put into practice?
9. Parental involvement, liaison and co-ordination	What is the policy on parental involvement? How are parents involved? How is liaison and co-ordination between settings achieved?
10. Monitoring and evaluation	What procedures are there for quality control? What strategies are there for monitoring and evaluation? How do these feed into institutional development?

Pascal and Bertram 1991

DEVELOPING PROFESSIONALS AND DEVELOPING METHODOLOGY

Once the concept of quality had been operationalised we began to develop the methodology for data collection. From its inception, the project has been a collaborative enterprise in which the researchers have worked closely with all those involved in the research settings. This has included - managers
- educators
- parents
- children.

We felt that participants should also help shape the methodology and their partnership and co-operation in this phase of the project has been invaluable.

The project has adopted a predominantly qualitative approach but it does use some quantitative methodology and statistical analysis for the documentation of the dimensions. The main thrust of the methodology can be termed "ILLUMINATIVE EVALUATION FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT" and can be seen to have four key strands:

* DOCUMENTATION - of policy and practice within each setting

* EVALUATION - of policy and practice by the researcher and and participants

* COMPARISON - of policy and practice between settings

* DEVELOPMENT - of policy and practice in each setting

The action-reflection cycle which characterises action research can also clearly be identified in the research strategy with a key aim being the exploration of how far the evaluation process can facilitate professional development. Working together, the "participants as researchers" and the "researchers as participants" aim to build up a PRESTRUCTURED CASE STUDY for each setting using the ten dimensions identified as a framework for the documentation process. These case studies or illuminative portraits provide a detailed and rich picture of how educational quality is interpreted and experienced by participants in each setting.

Data is gathered for each of the ten dimensions using the following research techniques:

1. DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS - in which the published policy statements of the national, local and individual providers are analysed to determine their stated philosophy, aims and objectives and approach to policy and practice.

2. SYSTEMATIC AND FOCUSSED OBSERVATION - using participant observation, target child, target adult, target group and target activity techniques (Sylva, Roy and Painter 1980). Video and audio taped data will also be collected.

3. SYSTEMATIC AND FOCUSSED INTERVIEWS - of key informants in each setting, including managers, educators, parents and children.

4. PROFESSIONAL BIOGRAPHIES - which record the training, qualifications and experience of those who work within the setting.

5. VIGNETTES - vivid accounts of practice as it is experienced by the participants and recorded through interaction with the researcher. This technique aims to capture a snapshot or mini movie of an episode of practice (Miles 1990).

The data derived from these research techniques are analysed and collated in collaboration with the participants to provide a detailed and carefully structured case study of the quality of educational practice within each setting. These pre-structured case studies are then subjected to three further processes:

EVALUATION : The case studies are fed back into each setting for validation and reflection. The participants are encouraged to

evaluate critically and systematically the quality of policy and practice within their setting with regard to each of the ten dimensions and to review and debate the match/mismatch in the perceptions of participants.

DEVELOPMENT : From this evaluation process participants are encouraged to identify a set of priorities for development and to plan a programme of professional and institutional development which would enhance the quality of education they provide.

COMPARISON : It is intended that during the life of the project a collection of illuminative case studies will be built up, representing a diverse range of provision for three and four year olds in the UK (approximately 25-30 settings are targeted). These case studies will be analysed comparatively to see how far different settings are associated with qualitatively different educational experiences. It is hoped that this will provide valuable information for policy makers in their decisions about future policy direction.

METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

We are very aware that the methodology described provides only one approach to the exploration of quality in early childhood education. It remains in an evolutionary state and I am sure its development and refinement will continue as the project enters its next phase of intensive data collection. However, the project team remain convinced that it provides an appropriate and rich strategy for the investigation of the research issues we have identified. Like every other approach the methodology we have adopted has its limitations and strengths and it is important that these are acknowledged.

LIMITATIONS

1. It is labour intensive - requiring the co-operation and commitment of the researcher and a range of participants in each setting.

2. It is time consuming - the development of trust, confidence and the ethos of a research community in each setting takes a considerable amount of time. Each case study takes at least a week of intensive activity to complete the data collection and a further week to compile and validate the case study. The development process takes much longer.

3. It can result in data overload - the methodology generates a wealth of information which needs to be sifted, analysed and organised. However, the pre-structured dimensions do facilitate the organisation process.

4. It is subject to bias - each participant is reporting their own experience and this will inevitably be subjective and value based. However, this is made explicit and the validity of each account is strengthened when viewed in its perspective as part of a triangulated whole.

5. Comparability is difficult - each setting is individual and the case studies will reflect the unique character and interpretation of quality by those within it. Again, this is acknowledged and comparablity is facilitated by the structural framework of the ten identified dimensions.

STRENGTHS

1. The accounts are vivid, rich and detailed - they provide honest, open and very accessible accounts of policy grounded in practice. They also have the ability to evoke feelings and thoughts aswell as action.

2. It requires little specialist expertise - the techniques used can be employed by educators in most settings for evaluation and appraisal purposes. Once the process has been established within a setting, the participants appear to gain ownership of it and generally it has continued as part of their practice once the researchers have withdrawn.

3. The data has a number of applications and outcomes - It provides data which is useful at:

- individual/personal level
- setting/institutional level
- national level.

It is envisaged that the case studies will be helpful for:

* Overall programme and provision evaluation - both within each setting and also for providers at a national and regional level.

* In-service training - the case studies provide rich and focussed material for training purposes within each setting but also for multi-disciplinary training courses where a range of case studies could be evaluated and compared.

* Research potential - by looking across the case studies it is possible to generalise about educational provision and practice for three and four year olds.

* Policy making and planning - an analysis of the data can support decision making about the allocation and targeting of resources and support.

SOME FINAL COMMENTS

The developmental process I have described has been a very rewarding process for all those involved. We have learnt a great deal over the last twelve months about what is possible, what works and importantly, what does not. We still have a long way to go but the process of development we have been through has raised a number of issues which I believe have relevance for all those engaged in research in early childhood education. They provide us all with an agenda for the future if we are to raise the status, visibility and funding levels of research in this critically important field of inquiry. The experience has shown:

Firstly, that research methodology for the investigation of the education of young children needs to be advanced and refined. It may also require the development of innovative and creative approaches which evolve from the particular research issues of early childhood, rather than the imposition of less appropriate but established methodologies. At present, the patriarchal funding authorities appear reluctant to take a risk with new and unproven research techniques and we have to work hard to convince them of their validity. Our applications should reflect this emphasis.

Secondly, that researchers must get better at making the links between their research and practice more explicit. I believe the onus is on us as researchers to ensure that we communicate our findings in ways which are accessible, appropriate and useful to those who are working with young children and those who are making decisions about the education they receive. We must break down the myths and mystery which surround educational research and ensure that research and practice proceed hand in hand and are often undertaken by the same people.

Thirdly, we have to become better at articulating and sharing the particular issues that researching the educational experience of young children generates. This involves developing forums and avenues of communication between ourselves so we can learn from each other. It also involves the development of strategies to ensure that the particular issues and methodologies of early childhood research get more visibility, acknowledgement and status in research journals, conferences and publications where at present more traditional and established areas of inquiry and methodologies dominate.

The challenge is there for all of us. Working together can only strengthen our cause and raise the status and visiblity of early childhood education. Researchers have a key part to play in the future development of childhood in Europe. We must ensure that we play that part with commitment and confidence.

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